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Book Review

“Heritage and Social Media. Understanding Heritage in a Participatory Culture “

Edited by Elisa Giaccardi

London & New York: Routledge (251pages)

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With *Heritage and Social Media. Understanding Heritage in a Participatory Culture* Elisa Giaccardi has produced an edited volume that contributes to the existing body of studies concerned with museum and heritage sites presented in this journal and at CSCW and CHI conferences. The articles in the book focus on the production, management and exhibition of heritage, both by ‘conventional’ modern institutions such as museums, and by people in their day-to-day technology-enhanced activities. Its overall thesis is that the increasing pervasiveness of social media confronts organisations and institutions with opportunities for renewing themselves and with challenges that put at risk their very existence.

The book is comprised of three parts. Following an introduction by Giaccardi that provides brief summaries of the key questions addressed by the articles in the book, the first part, “Social Practice”, explores how from the use of social media new social practices emerge through which people create heritage. Part two, “Public Formation”, discusses how these social practices lead to the emergence of “new publics” where people outside institutions like museums expertly discuss heritage matters. The third and final part of the book, “Sense of Place”, turns to a topic that not long ago was the theme of a Special Issue of this journal (Ciolfi, Fitzpatrick, and Bannon 2008). The articles in this part investigate how the notion of ‘place’ is contested when social media allow people to see place in different ways and expand place spatially and temporally (Speed pp.179-196). The three parts of the book and Giaccardi’s introduction are framed by two stimulating thought pieces by Graham Fairclough (Prologue) and Peter Wright (Afterword). As Giaccardi provides a good overview of the content of the book and the articles it comprises, I will not summarise the excellent contributions to this volume but discuss one or two points that I became interested in when reading the book for this review.

Heritage collection, management and consumption are rapidly changing. When visiting museums in the 1990s photography was rarely permitted. People would explore galleries and maybe purchase a catalogue or postcards to use as memory devices after their visit. By the year 2000 the rule “no photography” was increasingly lifted and one would often see people taking pictures of their friends and family posing next to famous works of art and design. The photographs, often taken with digital cameras, often became memories of the visit shared with others at later point in time. When digital cameras first appeared on the market people would often print and share photos in conventional ways, such as in paper albums. With the dissemination of smart phones and their high quality image capturing devices photos and video-clips produced during a visit to a heritage site now are shared, often instantaneously with friends and family via social media (Simon pp.89-106; Coyne, pp.161-178). By retaining and sharing these images and videos people create repositories of their memories on private and public servers, a topic that Risto Sarvas and David Frohlich (2011) recently explored in a book that has come out of discussions at CSCW and related conferences. Thus, archives of images, often together with descriptions are produced that are organised by means of tags people themselves create. Increasingly, therefore, people conduct activities that in the past were the expertise of museum and heritage professionals, such as curators, librarians or archivists, and the websites and digital archives, private and public, take on roles not dissimilar to heritage sites such as museums and libraries. Moreover, these repositories can become the basis for the emergence of new communities (Silberman and Purser pp.13-29) or grass roots heritage (Liu pp.30-55) and support people to engage in conversation about their special and specialist interests and concerns.

In light of these developments, museums and museum professionals, as some of the authors in this book argue (Russo pp.145-157), loose their authority to define what heritage is, what becomes part of society’s heritage, what is collected, conserved, archived and publically displayed, and what is disposed of. This challenging of modern institutions and organisations that at least for the past 100 years have been so central to many societies is one of the central themes of a number of contributions in this fascinating volume (see also Parry 2007). The various articles on theoretical and empirical analyses that demonstrate the tension between the authority of modern (heritage) institutions and people who increasingly generate their own sense and meaning of objects and artefacts on display (Liu pp.30-55); and as they make sense of objects they share and discuss, sometimes argue over, their understanding and experience of them with co-located others and with people elsewhere in the world (Iversen and Smith pp.126-144; Bidwell, Winschiers-Theophilus 197-216; Wakkary, Desjardins, Muse, Tanenbaum and Hatala pp. 217-238). As Russo and other articles in this book argue, how heritage is seen, experienced and understood is no longer defined by public institutions but is co-created by people in interaction with each other around the online and offline resources offered to them. It points to the need for further investigations into the role collaboration plays in organisation of leisure and work that has been the topic of articles and special issues in this journal (cf. Barkhuus and Brown 2007).

The vast amount of written and visual material that people currently create and archive generates a number of questions that are addressed by this volume. In particular, various authors raise question that people and organisations need to ask themselves: what is really worthwhile keeping? (Pitsillides, Jefferies and Conreen pp.56-68). This question entails political and moral as well as technological implications as it raises concerns about authority and control in organisations that

have been long-standing concerns for the readership of this journal. By discussing in detail and with respect to particular cases how pictures taken and archived are considered inoffensive and harmless by some are cultural not acceptable by others (Bidwell, Winschiers-Theophilus pp.197-216).

Something that might be of particular interest to the readership of this journal are technological questions discussed in the book. As people increasingly drive themselves the development of heritage sites, technologies are required that provide infrastructures that support people's "remembrance practices" (Simon pp.89-106) as well as their sense making practices (Iverson and Smith pp.126-144). As the experience and content of heritage sites is increasingly co-produced, the technology and the underlying infrastructure needs to be designed to facilitate collaboration and cooperation as well as activities like sharing (Russo pp.145-157). Ciolfi (pp.69-86) discusses various projects she has been involved in where exhibitions were created through "participatory design". This approach included users in the design process and was successful in creating heritage sites that engage visitors and the community and support the creation of memorable experiences. In a different way, Stuedahl and Mörtberg (pp.107-125) point to challenges for the maintenance of archives and heritage sites that are not kept under the authority of an organisation or institution. Moreover, they highlight the difficulty to keep such sites meaningful for future generations.

The particular strength of this book is the number of case studies the various authors draw on in their analysis of the impact of social media on heritage production and management as well as on theoretical concepts and empirical studies of heritage in light of the emergence of new technologies. The contributions add to the existing body of research in CSCW concerned with museums and galleries and opens up the field for further discussion in this journal and at related conferences. As the brief discussion of the political and moral implications of social media implied, the issues discussed in this book are of relevance to a range of modern institutions and organisation that see themselves confronted with stakeholders whose social media activities challenge positions of authority and control that defined prior times.

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